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MARK DERY

BLACK TO THE FUTURE: INTERVIEWS WITH SAMUEL R. DELANY,  
GREG TATE, AND TRICIA ROSE

[I]f all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and became truth. "Who controls the past," ran the Party slogan, "controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."

—George Orwell

There is nothing more galvanizing than the sense of a cultural past.

—Alain Locke

Yo, bust this, Black  
To the Future  
Back to the past  
History is a mystery 'cause it has  
All the info  
You need to know  
Where you're from  
Why'd you come and  
That'll tell you where you're going.

—Def Jef

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The interviews that follow began with a conundrum: Why do so few African Americans write science fiction, a genre whose close encounters with the Other—the stranger in a strange land—would seem uniquely suited

to the concerns of African-American novelists? Yet, to my knowledge, only Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, Steve Barnes, and Charles Saunders have chosen to write within the genre conventions of science fiction. This is especially perplexing in light of the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind).

Moreover, the sublegitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre in Western literature mirrors the subaltern position to which blacks have been relegated throughout American history. In this context, William Gibson's observation that SF is widely known as "the golden ghetto," in recognition of the negative correlation between market share and critical legitimization, takes on a curious significance.<sup>1</sup> So, too, does Norman Spinrad's use of the hateful phrase "token nigger" to describe "any science fiction writer of merit who is adopted . . . in the grand salons of literary power."<sup>2</sup>

Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called "Afrofuturism." The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn't the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers—white to a man—who have engineered our collective fantasies? The "semiotic ghosts" of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Frank R. Paul's illustrations for Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, the chromium-skinned, teardrop-shaped household appliances dreamed up by Raymond Loewy and Henry Dreyfuss, Norman Bel Geddes's *Futurama* at the 1939 New York World's Fair, and Disney's Tomorrowland still haunt the public imagination, in one capitalist, consumerist guise or another.<sup>3</sup>



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But African-American voices have other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come. If there is an Afrofuturism, it must be sought in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points. Glimpses of it can be caught in Jean-Michel Basquiat paintings such as *Molasses*, which features a pie-eyed, snaggletoothed robot; in movies such as John Sayles's *The Brother from Another Planet* and Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*; in records such as Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*, George Clinton's *Computer Games*, Herbie Hancock's *Future Shock*, and Bernie Worrell's *Blacktronic Science*; and in the intergalactic big-band jazz churned out by Sun Ra's *Omniverse Arkestra*, Parliament-Funkadelic's Dr. Seussian astropunk, and Lee "Scratch" Perry's dub reggae, which at its eeriest sounds as if it were made of dark matter and recorded in the crushing gravity field of a black hole ("Angel Gabriel and the Space Boots" is a typical title).

Afrofuturism percolates, as well, through black-written, black-drawn comics such as Milestone Media's *Hardware* ("A cog in the corporate machine is about to strip some gears . . ."), about a black scientist who dons forearm-mounted cannons and a "smart" battle suit to wage guerrilla war on his Orwellian, multinational employer. Milestone's press releases for its four titles—*Hardware*, *Blood Syndicate*, *Static*, and *Icon*—make the Manhattan-based company's political impulses explicit: a fictional metropolis, Dakota, provides a backdrop for "authentic, multicultural" superheroes "linked in their struggle to defeat the S.Y.S.T.E.M."<sup>4</sup> The city is a battlefield in "the clash of two worlds: a low-income urban caldron and the highest level of privileged society."

*Icon*, an exemplar of Afrofuturism that sweeps antebellum memories, hip-hop culture, and cyberpunk into its compass, warrants detailed exegesis. The story begins in 1839, when an escape pod jettisoned from an exploding alien starliner lands, fortuitously, in the middle of a cotton field on Earth. A slave woman named Miriam stumbles on "a perfect little black baby"—in fact, an extraterrestrial whose morphogenetic technology has altered it to resemble the first life form it encounters—in the smoldering wreckage of the pod and raises it as her own. The orphan, christened Augustus, is male, and echoes of the Old Testament account of Moses in the bullrushes, the

fay changelings of European folklore, and the infant Superman's fiery fall from the heavens reverberate in the narrative's opening scenes.

Like his Roman namesake, Augustus is a "man of the future";<sup>5</sup> the man who fell to Earth is seemingly deathless, outliving several generations of his adopted family and eventually posing as his own great-grandson—Augustus Freeman IV—in present-day Dakota. A rock-ribbed conservative who preaches the gospel of Horatio Alger and inveighs against the welfare state, Freeman is a highly successful attorney, the only African American living in the city's exclusive Prospect Hills neighborhood. His unshakable belief in bootstrapping is challenged, however, when he takes a homegirl from the projects, Rachel "Rocket" Ervin, under his wing. A juvenile delinquent and Toni Morrison fan, the streetwise teenager opens Augustus's eyes to "a world of misery and failed expectations that he didn't believe still existed in this country." She calls on him to use his otherworldly powers to help the downtrodden. When, in the guise of Icon—a mountain of bulging abs and pecs—he does, she joins him as his sidekick. "As the series progresses," we are told, "Rocket will become the world's first superheroine who is also a teenage, unwed mother."

The New York graffiti artist and B-boy theoretician Rammellzee constitutes yet another incarnation of Afrofuturism. Greg Tate holds that Rammellzee's "formulations on the juncture between black and Western sign systems make the extrapolations of [Houston] Baker and [Henry Louis] Gates seem elementary by comparison," submitting as evidence the artist's "Ikonoklast Panzerism," a heavily armored descendant of late 1970s "wild-style" graffiti (those bulbous letters that look as if they were twisted out of balloons).<sup>6</sup> A 1979 drawing depicts a Panzerized letter "S": it is a jumble of sharp angles that suggests a cubist *Nude Bestriding a Jet Ski*. "The Romans stole the alphabeta system from the Greeks through war," explains Rammellzee. "Then, in medieval times, monks ornamented letters to hide their meaning from the people. Now, the letter is armored against further manipulation."<sup>7</sup>

In like fashion, the artist encases himself, during gallery performances, in *Gasholeer*, a 148-pound, gadgetry-encrusted exoskeleton inspired by an android he painted on a subway train in 1981. Four



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years in the making, Rammellzee's exuberantly low-tech costume bristles with rocket launchers, nozzles that gush gouts of flame, and an all-important sound system.

From both wrists, I can shoot seven flames, nine flames from each sneaker's heel, and colored flames from the throat. Two girl doll heads hanging from my waist and in front of my balls spit fire and vomit smoke. . . . The sound system consists of a Computator, which is a system of screws with wires. These screws can be depressed when the keyboard gun is locked into it. The sound travels through the keyboard and screws, then through the Computator, then the belt, and on up to the four mid-range speakers (with tweeters). This is all balanced by a forward wheel from a jet fighter plane. I also use an echo chamber, Vocoder, and system of strobe lights. A coolant device keeps my head and chest at normal temperature. A 100-watt amp and batteries give me power.<sup>8</sup>

The B-boy bricolage bodied forth in Rammellzee's "bulletproof arsenal," with its dangling, fetish-like doll heads and its Computator cobbled together from screws and wires, speaks to dreams of coherence in a fractured world, and to the alchemy of poverty that transmutes sneakers into high style, turntables into musical instruments, and spray-painted tableaux on subway cars into hit-and-run art. Concretizing Gibson's shibboleth, "The street finds its own uses for things," hip-hop culture retrofits, refunctions, and willfully misuses the technocommodities and science fictions generated by dominant culture, offering eloquent testimony on behalf of Gates's assertion that "[t]he Afro-American tradition has been figurative from its beginnings."

How could it have survived otherwise? . . . Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures. . . . "Reading," in this sense, was not play; it was an essential aspect of the "literacy" training of a child. This sort of metaphorical literacy, the learning to decipher complex codes, is just about the blackest aspect of the black tradition.<sup>9</sup>



Rammellzee in his costume *Gasholeer*. Photo courtesy of Tracy A. Smith.

What stories, then, are told by the “human beatbox” effects used in early hip-hop, in which MC’s such as Fat Boy Darren Robinson used vocal sounds to emulate electronic drums and turntable scratching; the electro-boogie releases of the early 1980s, which David Toop called “a soundtrack for vidkids to live out fantasies born of a science-fiction revival (courtesy of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) . . . [records characterized by] imagery drawn from computer games, video, cartoons, sci-fi and hip-hop slanguage”;<sup>10</sup> and the stiff-limbed, robotic twitches that breakdancing inherited from the 1970s fad, “robot dancing”?

In a first, faltering step toward the exploration of this territory, I put these and other questions to three African-American thinkers whose writing suggested points of connection with the subject at hand: Samuel R. Delany, a semiotician and long-standing member of the science fiction community; Greg Tate, a cultural critic and staff writer for the *Village Voice*; and Tricia Rose, Assistant Professor of Africana Studies and History at New York University, who is currently at work on a book on rap music and the politics of black cultural practice. Their responses, taken together, constitute a map of one small corner of the largely unexplored psychogeography of Afrofuturism.

MARK DERY: You mentioned, in an earlier, informal conversation, that the black presence in science fiction fandom was on the rise.<sup>11</sup> What leads you to believe this?

SAMUEL R. DELANY: Simply going to SF conventions and seeing more dark faces. One only wishes there’d been a comparable rise in black SF writers. When you look around at the various areas of popular culture—take comic books—you find a notable increase among black creators—Brian Stelfreeze, Denys Cowan, and Kyle Baker (whose graphic novel *Why I Hate Saturn* is a contemporary satire involving black and white characters talking to each other about their problems with some rather problematic observations on feminism thrown in), Malcolm Jones, Mark Bright, and Mike Sargent with his James Scott project (but one could double the length of this list, with names like Derek Dingle, Trevor van Eeden, David Williams, Ron Wilson, Paris

Cullens, Malcolm Davis, and Bill Morimon). But there still seem to be only four black, English-language science fiction novelists: Octavia Butler, Steve Barnes, Charles Saunders, and me—the same number there was ten years ago.

It was fairly easy to understand why, say, from the fifties through the seventies, the black readership of SF was fairly low—by no means nonexistent. But far lower than it is today. The flashing lights, the dials, and the rest of the imagistic paraphernalia of science fiction functioned as social signs—signs people learned to read very quickly. They signaled technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying, “Boys Club! Girls, keep out. Blacks and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!”

Science fiction is the kind of genre that, until you have the readers, you can't have the writers. But the readers are there, today. So I'm kind of wondering, I confess, where the new black writers are hiding out.

**MARK DERY:** Have you ever felt, as one of the few blacks writing SF, the pressure to write science fiction deeply inscribed with the politics of black nationalism?

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** The answer there depends on what your question means. If you mean: Do I feel that, deep within my work, I've situated material that encourages the reader's engagement with some of the political questions that the disenfranchised people in this country, victimized by oppression and an oppressive discourse based on the evil and valorized notion of nationhood and its hideous white—no other color—underbelly, imperialism, must face but cannot overcome without internalizing some of the power concepts and relationships inescapably entailed in the notion of “nation” itself? Well, if that's what you mean, my answer is: Damned right I have! Certainly from my 1974 novel *Dhalgren* on, that's been a major plank, reason, and justification in, of, and for my project.

If, on the other hand, you mean: Do I feel that the surface of my work must blatantly display signs of solidarity with those who, through the real despairs imposed on them by oppression, have momentarily abandoned any critique of the presuppositions of nationhood and its internal contradictions, and that, through such signs in

my work, I endeavor to speak back to those people in a voice indistinguishable from theirs, confirming what in them cannot question, what in them does not have the luxury of being able to critique the grounds on which they stand—a confirmation which, while I acknowledge that its project is an endlessly practical and necessary one, and one which I can usually support at some level of abstraction? Well, if that's what you mean, then, alas, the answer is: No. That's not part of my project—even though I often approve of it in others. Still, it's just not what I do best.

It's struck me more and more over the years that one of the most forceful and distinguishing aspects of science fiction is that it's marginal. It's always at its most honest and most effective when it operates—and claims to be operating—from the margins. Whenever—sometimes just through pure enthusiasm for its topic—it claims to take center stage, I find it usually betrays itself in some way. I don't want to see it operating from anyone's center: black nationalism's, feminism's, gay rights', pro-technology movements', ecology movements', or any other center.

If you think this idea has something to do with eschewing “political correctness,” you will be completely misreading me, by the by. It's purely a matter of strategic efficacy.

**MARK DERY:** About your work, Greg Tate has written:

I've always found Delany's racially defused futures problematic because they seem to deny the possibility that the affirmative aspects of black American culture and experience could survive assimilation. . . . And while his fiction is full of black and other protagonists of color . . . the race of these characters is not at the core of their cultural identity. Which used to bug me out like a mug because what I expected from our one black science-fiction writer was SF which envisioned the future of black culture as I'd defined it, from a more or less nationalist stance.<sup>12</sup>

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** I suspect Greg is writing there about my early work—up through, say, *Nova* [1968]. But if you line all my books together on the shelf, though that period (from '62, when at twenty

I started publishing, to '68, when I sat back and decided to figure out what I was really doing here) contains a lot of titles, in number of pages the early period is only about a third of my production or less. He says, you note, that it used to bug him. I wonder how much he's bugged by it now?

Now part of what, from my marginal position, I see as the problem is the idea of *anybody's* having to fight the fragmentation and multicultural diversity of the world, not to mention outright oppression, by constructing something so rigid as an identity, an identity in which there has to be a fixed and immobile core, a core that is structured to hold inviolate such a complete biological fantasy as race—whether white or black.

I'm much more comfortable with, at least as a provisional analysis, one of James Baldwin's last rhetorical strategies, which he proposed in the preface to his collected nonfiction, *The Price of the Ticket*. There Baldwin wrote that it suddenly struck him that there were no white people—that is to say, "whiteness," as it indicated a race, was purely an anxiety fantasy to which certain people had been trained immediately to leap (and, Baldwin realized, felt wholly inadequate to make that leap) whenever they encountered certain other people whom they coded as black or nonwhite. In short, "white" is just something you, Mark Dery, have been socially convinced you are, out of a kind of knee-jerk fear, whenever you happen to glance in my—or indeed, Greg's, or any other nonwhite person's—direction. Realizing this gave Baldwin an extraordinary sense of power. To the extent that such a sense can empower analytical insight, it may be one we can all use.

To the extent that some of that earlier work of mine yearned to be at—was suffused with the yearning for—the center of the most traditional SF enterprise, well: I can admit that—there—something is dead on in Greg's criticism. But from *Dhalgren* on, I'd demur.

**MARK DERY:** In *Starboard Wine*, there's a wonderful speech given by you at the Studio Museum of Harlem, where you say, "We need images of tomorrow, and our people need them more than most."

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** The historical reason that we've been so impoverished in terms of future images is because, until fairly recently, as

a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past. I have no idea where, in Africa, my black ancestors came from because, when they reached the slave markets of New Orleans, records of such things were systematically destroyed. If they spoke their own languages, they were beaten or killed. The slave pens in which they were stored by lots were set up so that no two slaves from the same area were allowed to be together. Children were regularly sold away from their parents. And every effort conceivable was made to destroy all vestiges of what might endure as African social consciousness. When, indeed, we say that this country was founded on slavery, we must remember that we mean, specifically, that it was founded on the systematic, conscientious, and massive destruction of African cultural remnants. That some musical rhythms endured, that certain religious attitudes and structures seem to have persisted, is quite astonishing, when you study the efforts of the white, slave-importing machinery to wipe them out.

My grandfather was born a slave in Georgia. Emancipation came when he was two. When he grew up, he became an Episcopal minister and helped develop a black college, St. Augustine's, outside Raleigh, North Carolina, which still operates today. By both white and black ministers of the Archdiocese of North and South Carolina, he was later elected bishop. But to talk about where his roots were in Africa is a hopeless task. He didn't know. His parents—born here, in this country, in slavery—didn't know. They were not allowed to.

No immigrant group—neither Irish, Italians, Germans, Jews, nor Scandinavians—for all the prejudices that all of them met when they got here, and which they all had to overcome, endured such massive cultural destruction. And because it was inflicted on us, the country's been paying for it ever since.

This is why black history is so important—more, even such a violently contested area, in black intellectual life today.

**MARK DERY:** You spoke earlier about the polished chromium exterior you believe functions as a semiotic fence, keeping SF segregated. Increasingly, however, the young urban blacks responsible for vital art forms such as hip-hop live in what might be called "beeper culture," where miniaturized digital technology is everywhere at hand.

Nintendo and cellular phones, as well as the samplers, synthesizers, drum machines, and PC's used in the fabrication of hip-hop tracks, are ubiquitous. Why, then, would black youth be alienated by SF signifiers for high technology?

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** The immediate answer is simply that the sign language is more complicated than you're giving it credit for. The miniature technology you cite is not a shiny, glittering, polished technology. Above all, it comes in matte-black, plastic boxes. From the beepers, the Walkmen, the Diskmen, through the biggest ghetto blaster—the stuff put forward as portable is not chromium. It's black. With the exception of the silver CD (which, to become functional, must be slipped into its black-encased digital reader), this is a very different set of signifiers from the sparkling bus bars, the quivering dials, and the fuming beakers of science fiction imagery.

The images of technology that say "SF" to most people come from a period in which we had a very different relationship with our technology from the one we have today. The period from the twenties through the sixties that supplies most of those SF images was a time when there was always a bright sixteen- or seventeen-year-old around who could fix your broken radio—and later, your broken television. He'd been building his own crystal radios and winding his own coils since he was nine; he had his tube tester and his ampmeter, and he'd go poking around in the back, find the dead tube, locate the blown resister or condenser, take it out, get another one for fifty cents or five dollars, and replace it for you with a little spit and his own soldering iron. And, yes, he was about 85 percent white.

The black boxes of modern street technology (or the white boxes of computer technology—not an accidental distinction, I'm sure) put us in a very different relationship with the inner workings, however. The kids who were the budding electronics repairmen are, today, the computer hackers. And if you are having a software problem, yes, often they can help you. But when the *hardware* goes—when one of those chips gets a crack or a scratch—they're just as lost as anybody else. And that means, at the material level, our technology is becoming more and more like magic—with a class of people who know the incredibly complex spells and incantations needed to get the stuff to work, but almost none of whom can get in there and fix it.

But I have to mention, even having given that passing answer, within your question I hear a certain celebration of consumer society that glosses over some very real problems—problems that, if we unpack your question in one way rather than another, will finally trivialize my answer. In what you've asked, I can detect the possibility of a naive assumption that the redistribution of commodities is somehow congruent with the redistribution of wealth—which it is not. Just as seriously, I can detect an assumption that the distribution of commodities is at one with access to the formation of those commodities and the commodity system—the simple choice of what commodities are to be made, as well as access to how those commodities are to be formed and organized.

So that when one talks about "black youth culture as a technological culture," one has to specify that it's a technological culture that's almost entirely on the receiving end of a river of "stuff," in which the young consumers have nowhere near what we might call equitable input.

In short, to look at any of these black cultural youth movements as an easy and happy development blossoming uncritically from the overwhelmingly white world of high-tech production that, yes, makes that culture possible, is, I suspect, thoroughly to misread the fiercely oppositional nature of this art: scratch and sampling begin, in particular, as a specific *miss-use* and conscientious *desecration* of the artifacts of technology and the entertainment media. And that's even before you get to the complex social critique of rap lyrics—which, to get heard at all, so often must hide within their rhythms and electronic mixing techniques.

**MARK DERY:** Hasn't that perception changed in the wake of cyberpunk, which shoved SF, face first, into urban grunge?

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** Cyberpunk was by no means the first science fiction to talk about dirt. And as far as any change in perception, I find myself wondering if we can use cyberpunk for anything except an examination of what any astute critic has got to admit was finally a pervasive misreading of an interim period of urban technoculture, a misreading that—for me at any rate—was no longer possible after the riots at last year's initial acquittal of Rodney King's police thugs. "The street finds its own uses for things" was the phrase so acutely

taken early on from Gibson (he uses it in at least two stories) as the slogan for the cyberpunk sensibility.

But lifting it out of context immediately began to repress its considerable irony. The measure of that irony was the measure of the phrase's acknowledgment of the anger, the rage, the coruscating fury from the streets toward the traditional use (which is, after all, lying to the people) of that technological armamentarium that is the referent for that cool and breezy word "things."

To stand in the midst of the millions of dollars of devastation in Los Angeles and say, with an ironic smile, "The street finds its own uses for things" is beyond irony and into the lunatic.

**MARK DERY:** One thing that intrigued me about your brief essay on the phenomenon, "Is Cyberpunk a Good Thing or a Bad Thing?" is that you made no mention of the orbital Rastafarians in Gibson's *Neuromancer*.<sup>13</sup> I find that curious, given the fact that blacks do not figure largely in the literature: Gibson's orbital Rastas were heralded, in some quarters, as signifying something, although no one quite knew what.

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** Why should I have mentioned them?

**MARK DERY:** For me, a white reader, the Rastas in *Neuromancer*'s Zion colony are intriguing in that they hold forth the promise of a holistic relationship with technology; they're romanticized arcadians who are obviously very adroit with jury-rigged technology. They struck me as superlunary Romare Beardens—*bricoleurs* whose orbital colony was cobbled together from space junk and whose music, Zion Dub, is described by Gibson (in a wonderfully mixed metaphor) as "a sensuous mosaic cooked from vast libraries of digitalized pop."

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** Well, let me read them for you as a black reader. The Rastas—he never calls them Rastafarians, by the way, only using the slang term—are described as having "shrunken hearts," and their bones are brittle with "calcium loss." Their music, Zion Dub, can be wholly analyzed and reproduced by the Artificial Intelligence, Wintermute (who, in the book, stands in for a multinational corporation), so completely that the Rastas themselves cannot tell the difference—in fact the multinational mimic job is so fine that with it Wintermute can make the Rastas do precisely what it wants, in this

case help a drugged-out white hood and sleazebag get from here to there. As a group, they seem to be computer illiterates: when one of their number, Aerol, momentarily jacks into Case's computer and sees cyberspace, what he perceives is "Babylon"—city of sin and destruction—which, while it makes its ironic comment on the book, is nevertheless tantamount to saying that Aerol is completely without power or knowledge to cope with the real world of Gibson's novel: indeed, through their pseudo-religious beliefs, they are effectively barred from cyberspace. From what we see, women are not a part of the Rasta colony at all. Nor do we ever see more than four of the men together—so that they do not even have a group presence. Of the three chapters in which they appear, no more than three pages are actually devoted to describing them or their colony.

You'll forgive me if, as a black reader, I didn't leap up to proclaim this passing presentation of a powerless and wholly nonoppositional set of black dropouts, by a Virginia-born white writer, as the coming of the black millennium in science fiction; but maybe that's just a black thang. . . .

Let me withdraw the *ad hominem* part of the argument. It distorts a very real situation. Look, white and Virginia-born he may be, but he also gave up his American citizenship during the Vietnam War; Bill is a friend of mine—and I think he's an extraordinary writer. And *Neuromancer*'s an extraordinary book. But your question is indicative of precisely what I was speaking about in the essay you cited: the interpretive idiocies that arise as soon as a book is lifted out of its genre and cut loose from the tradition that precedes and produces it—in this case, science fiction. To say, as you do, that "blacks do not figure largely in the literature" of science fiction is perfectly true. But there are still far more extensive, far more thorough, and far more interesting presentations of blacks in science fiction (as well as what Sister Souljah calls so astutely "the white problem") than the couple of pages Bill devotes to the Rastas. Frankly, if you're going to go to the white writers for your science fiction template for thinking about the problems blacks have in America, I'd rather see a serious discussion of Robert Heinlein's appallingly fascist 1964 novel, *Farnham's Freehold*, in which the black house servant, Joseph, after a successful nuclear attack, abandons his white family (in which, after the attack,

he was made second in command by the reigning white patriarch) and becomes head of a movement of blacks who have solved the post-holocaust food problem by killing whites and eating them. Though I doubt that you—and certainly not I—or many of our readers would approve of the course or outcome of Heinlein's story, the point is that Joseph is articulate, he has real power, and Heinlein is consciously ironizing powerful cultural myths of cannibalism precisely for their troubling anxieties. He forces us, in the course of his tale, to think about the situation—even if we don't agree with him, or his mouth-piece, Hugh Farnham.

From a more positive angle, though, I'd suggest you look at the character of Mordecai Washington in—another white writer—Thomas M. Disch's 1968 SF novel, *Camp Concentration*. Disch's character is a borderline sociopathic prisoner in an army brig, who, with a number of other prisoners, is subjected to military experiments in which he is injected with a substance that turns him into a super-genius. At pretty much each level of his intellectual growth, he reinterprets his position as a black. The whole book is quite a performance. Indeed, Mordecai was the first black character that I'd ever read by a white writer—in science fiction or out—who simply didn't ring false to me. But, indeed, the whole book is a pyrotechnical exercise that Disch brings off stunningly.

And that of course is specifically not to mention what we—Octavia, Charles, Steve—as *black* writers, have done in SF. I should think, if that were your interest, that would be the first place you'd turn to do a considered and detailed reading!

The point, of course, with Gibson's Rastas, is that forcing you to think about racial matters is just not what Bill's text is about over their particular, brief appearance in *Neuromancer*.

If you look through Gibson's work up to his first novel, you realize that what he's doing in his sketch of the Rastas is giving you a somewhat dusky replay of the "Lo-teks" he dealt with much more pointedly and, I think, far more powerfully, in his early SF short story "Johnny Mnemonic" [1983]—in some ways the narrative dry run for *Neuromancer*. There, the Lo-teks' "killing floor" becomes the arena in which Molly, who will appear again in *Neuromancer*, dispatches the Yakuza mobster, sent up into the girders and rafters of the city

to hunt down Johnny—and kills him, I might add, to a culturally indigenous music far more unsettling than "the sensuous mosaic" of pop that is Zion Dub, a music Wintermute would have a much harder time duplicating and co-opting for its multinational purposes!

And while I don't think for a moment that this was Bill's intent, I do feel that it speaks directly from "the political unconscious" of the cyberpunk subgenre that, as soon as Bill specifically "darkened" the Lo-teks' image and re-presented it in the form of the Rastas, they lost all their oppositional charge—hell, all their physical strength—all their cultural specificity, their massive group presence, and their social power to escape the forces of multinational capitalism.

At the end of "Johnny Mnemonic," Johnny and Molly decide to stay, living above the clutter of the Sprawl, in the self-selected grunge of the Lo-teks. And, as the narrator concludes, it's a pretty good life.

The "Lo-teks" were Gibson's real romantic bricoleurs: they were not specifically black, but rather "fourth world" whites. Still, several people more familiar with the SF genre out of which Gibson was writing have suggested that they had their own, darker precursors. . . . But it's quite possible that a conscientious Gibson decided Johnny's was a pretty unrealistic ending. It was just too good. That's not the way things work in the real world. Johnny is, after all, the focus of a million-dollar-plus hunt by the Japanese mob. To have him slip through the cracks like that and live among the Lo-teks happily ever after—well, I can see how a writer might say: we have to do a little better than that! But, unlike the Lo-teks, the Rastas don't even try to oppose the system. Perhaps a slightly older Gibson thought that if they did, they would fail. But since he doesn't show that failure, he's chosen to put the problem generally in the shadows.

There's a wonderful, almost hypnotic surface hardness to *Neuromancer* that goes along with its unremitting resistance to any sort of real subjective reading of any of the characters; at the same time, the glitter keeps you trying to peer past it, trying to find levels of depth in which, once you locate them, all you can see is your own shattered reflection. It's one of the rare pieces of fiction, inside SF or out, even almost a decade after it appeared, that lets you know there are such things as multinational corporations, and suggests the overwhelming effect they have, all but invisibly, on our lives!

It's also a novel in which the United States of America as a political entity is not mentioned from one end to the other. Though the world has become as much Japanified as Americanized, in *Neuromancer* the United States of America may no longer even exist, for all we know. Now, these are some of the areas in which the inarguable successes and excellencies of Gibson's novel lie. But, no—not the Rastas. Sorry.

**MARK DERY:** In "Cyberpunk in Boystown," Andrew Ross voices his suspicions of the way in which cyberpunks have romanticized urban decay, turning it into a backdrop for fashion shoots and MTV videos:

It is perhaps no coincidence that none of the major cyberpunk writers were city-bred, although their work feeds off the phantasmic street diet of Hobbesian lawlessness and the aesthetic of detritus that is assumed to pervade the hollowed-out core of the great metropolitan centers. This urban fantasy, however countercultural its claims and potential effects, shared the dominant, white middle-class conception of inner-city life.<sup>14</sup>

Does this literary convention trouble you, given that the creators and consumers of these myths are, as Ross suggests, primarily white suburbanites?

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** Not really. What you've got is simply people wanting to explore what's on the other side of the railroad tracks. The initial impulse always involves a bit of romanticizing. And to say that the cyberpunks are not "city-bred" is, at least in Gibson's case, something of a red herring. Though he was born in the country, throughout his pretty peripatetic adolescence Bill spent a good deal of his life in cities—and looking at them from the level of the marginal counterculture, too.

Indeed, what Ross's statement suggests to me more than anything else is the wearing away of the rural/urban divide, a wearing away which is, today, both a media and a transportation phenomenon. The difference between the city and the country just doesn't mark off—at the middle-class level—the same sort of class distinction as it did twenty-five years ago.

The microtechnology that, in cyberpunk, connects the streets to the multinational structures of information in cyberspace also connects the middle-class country to the middle-class city.

**MARK DERY:** What do you make of the African-American characters in television SF—the engineer Geordi Laforge and the Klingon Worf on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, for example?

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** I have to confess, I'm not really a TV watcher. It's much easier for me to talk about written science fiction.

In 1986, I taught a seminar at Cornell on Gibson's work up to that date, comparing it and contrasting it to the work of another equally interesting SF writer (quite as well-known and respected as Gibson—within the world of SF readers and writers), John Varley; in the seminar I tried to lay the groundwork for a nonreductive psychoanalytic reading of their respective texts, which involved putting together a science-fictional critique of psychoanalysis, from the work of writers like Sturgeon, Bester, and Zelazny, who had all dealt in detail with psychoanalysis in their own stories. But that means that this is all material that—at least with a quick flip through my notes of half a dozen years back—I have some access to.

For most of us in the science fiction world, the cyberpunk movement was a vigorous, interesting—and extremely short-lived—moment. It had no existence to speak of before 1983. And it was over by 1987. Its *Ur*-beginning is Bruce Bethke's 1980 story "Cyberpunk," which was not published till 1983, in George Scithers's *Astounding Science Fiction*. That same year, SF editor Gardner Dozois used the term to indicate a group of writers, more or less organized around Bruce Sterling's Texas-based fanzine *Cheap Truth*, as "the cyberpunks." (Ironically, Bethke himself, who'd coined the term, was not at all a part of the group Dozois used it to label.) They included Gibson, Sterling, Shirley, Shiner, Maddox, Cadigan, Laidlaw, and a few others. The next year, in 1984, Gibson's first novel, *Neuromancer*, won the Nebula Award from the SF Writers of America and the Hugo Award from the World Science Fiction Convention. Shortly, the group came to a larger notice than is usual in the world outside SF through the hype generated by an extraordinarily uninformed article in *Rolling Stone*—too many years ago for me to even remember it.<sup>15</sup> The interest persisted thanks to the usual promises of Big Movie Deals. In 1986, William Burroughs was retained by a short-lived production company called the Cabana Boys to do a film script for *Neuromancer*, and I spent a very pleasant afternoon with him at his home in Lawrence,

Kansas, brainstorming over ways to deal with the story on film, while James Grauerholz whipped up some truly delicious tournedos Rossini in the kitchen. Needless to say, the project never went anywhere. But the continuing interest in the cyberpunks by academics, as something they persist in seeing as alive and still functioning, strikes me—I must confess—as a largely nostalgic pursuit of a more innocent worldview, which, as I said, to me has no more active historical validity once we pass the Los Angeles King riots.

You understand—I wouldn't for a moment begrudge Gibson any of the fame and attention his fine and interesting novel has gained him. As someone who's regularly cited—most generously by Bill, as well as others—as an influence on it and precursor of it, it would ill behoove me to balk. That may well be all the points I'll ever garner in the pinball machine of Greater Literary Fame.

But I also believe that a text speaks loudest and most forcefully when its meanings are clearest and most focused; and, as with any text, it's the tradition in which it's written that makes it signify most clearly. So when I see Gibson's text torn out of its tradition and set free to float about over the cultural moraine and morass, even while people go around shouting how great it is, I tend to see it losing its meaning.

For me, cyberpunk was exciting in that it evoked a dialogue in the SF community. It was a vital and exciting force precisely in that it called up Jeanne Gomoll's feminist critique of cyberpunk's version of SF historiography in her "Open Letter to Joanna Russ"<sup>16</sup>—and even as that critique elicited Sterling's arrogant and ugly response in the next *Aurora*, as well as the much more pointed and important responses, by both men and women, including Cy Chauvin, Lisa Tuttle, Suzy McGee Charnas, Avodon Carol, and Don D'Ammassa. (Unfortunately that *Aurora*, number 26, did not appear until in 1990.) It was exciting because it pointed up differences and made writers like Kim Stanley Robinson, John Kessel, Connie Willis, Nancy Kress, Michael Swanwick, and Karen Joy Fowler articulate their own positions. It created a kind of spotlight in the field, now focused within the cyberpunk group, highlighting Shirley's *Eclipse* trilogy, now pointed at talented and exciting writers outside the group. The interviews and essays and position papers, from Sterling and Shirley and Gibson, from writers critical of the group's position—well, to me, the sweep-

ing back and forth of attention was what made cyberpunk signify. But that was a process really over, when all was said and done, by 1987.

At least once—in 1987—a young editor proposed putting together a cyberpunk casebook of this material on and around cyberpunk, which Bruce Sterling quashed with some ugly threats—practically of excommunication—to any one of the cyberpunk group who co-operated or let his or her work appear in it. That was just at the time when academic interest was first starting. Perhaps he felt that cyberpunk might be compromised if some of his—or, indeed, some of the other—naïve and more polemical statements from the days of *Cheap Truth* were allowed a large circulation. To me, of course, it's the various writers like "Sue Dennim" (Lew Shiner) and "Vincent Omnipotens" (Sterling's alter ego), in their very outrageousness, who were a good deal of the life of the movement—and I think worthy of preservation. I've never spoken to Sterling about that incident, so I don't know what his reasons were—but it looked pretty totalitarian and ugly from the outside. And certainly, from that point on, I was no longer interested in cyberpunk as a movement. I think a number of other people, both on the inside and the outside, felt much the same way.

I'm a great believer in contexts—but a work of art must be able to survive in a transcontextual life. That Gibson's novel obviously has had the craft and vigor to do so—well, all I can do is applaud it. I'm very glad it speaks to as many people as it does.

But I think this started as a question about black TV characters.

For most of my adult life I haven't even owned a television set. During the years I did, it was so that a lover or my daughter might watch it. I really couldn't make anything more than the most glib and passing remark on the TV presentation of blacks in science fiction shows—like *Star Trek*, of whatever generation. When people have sat me down in front of a screen and made me watch, I've liked Whoopi Goldberg.

I'm a text person—just not much of a media man. Now, that's a failing in any discussion of the many media referents and resonances of cyberpunk, but I'm the first to admit it.

**MARK DERY:** It was my understanding that social engineers like the anticapitalist technocrats, whose slogan was "Governance by science.

social control through the power of technique," dominated SF fandom in the late thirties and early forties. Wasn't there an elitist, if not crypto-right, slant to the literature from the very beginning?

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** Once again, that sounds to me like a simple historical misunderstanding about the history and tradition of science fiction. Indeed, when you say that fandom was dominated by the right in the thirties and forties, I'm not even sure what you could be referring to. The most important group in the forties was the Futurians—practically an auxiliary of YPSL [The Young Peoples' Socialist League]. The young people who belonged to it included Asimov, Judith Merril, Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl, Lester Del Rey, Donald Wolheim, Harry Harrison—indeed, just about anybody in science fiction from that time you might ever have heard of today. It was my understanding that science fiction in those days was dominated by the left. Oh, there were arguments over whether you were a Trotskyite or a Stalinist—but this was an argument of the left, not an argument between left and right.

Even Robert Heinlein's politics in those days have been described by his close friend L. Sprague de Camp as "bright, liberal pink." Heinlein of course was interested—far more than most of the others—in working for actual social change. The result was that, as time went on, his methods and his arguments came to seem more and more conservative. But I believe Heinlein always saw his audience (even when no one else did) as the articulate, intelligent left. Even in something like *Farnham's Freehold*, he was basically out to *épater les gauchistes*.

The rightist strain in SF fandom has always been there—and has always been vigorously discussed. But, in a field inhabited largely by liberal eccentrics, the rightists have been seen as our most *misguided* eccentrics. Also, it tends to be a rightism about things like foreign policy, rather than domestic practice. In the sixties, there was a famous advertisement run in the pages of the professional SF magazines, which began when a group of SF writers against the war in Vietnam felt that they had to take out a signed ad that said so. Well, once it was known that they were doing this, a group of West Coast SF writers felt they had to take out an opposing ad saying that they supported the government in the war effort. (They were very clear to say, too, that they supported not the idea of war, but that

they felt, when there was a war, they ought to give the government their support.) The two ads ended up running side by side in a number of SF magazines. The antiwar list of names was notably longer. But what was even more apparent to those of us in the field, once the ads appeared, was that the split was self-evidently between those writers who lived on the East Coast (antiwar) and those who lived on the West Coast (government supporters). It was also clear, from reading the two statements of principle that headed the ads, that both addressed totally different issues. Indeed, there was no reason why one couldn't have signed *both* ads and not have indulged any necessary contradictions—though no one did!

But I don't see any of the writers on either of those lists opposing, say, greater efforts to integrate schools racially. So, you see, there's right and there's Right.

**MARK DERY:** I wonder if what you're describing wasn't closer, in spirit, to libertarianism than to what we traditionally think of as rightism.

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** It very well may be.

**MARK DERY:** And for that reason isn't its stamp legible in cyberpunk, whose politics seem more libertarian than left?

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** Again, I'd say that locating SF in its traditions might be helpful here. There's a certain rhetorical process that happens whenever a political argument is reduced to a dialogue: you see it in Plato. You see it in Ayn Rand. You see it in Heinlein—I've seen it happen in my own *Neveryon* series.

Real political arguments go on for hours—forever—and are filled with a lot of ums and ahs, general backtracking, and people going over the same terrain again and again, trying to figure out what they actually think. That's the real process of political discussion. In a novel, however, you haven't got time to lay out the whole thing, or to portray the terribly slow way people are moved, microstep by microstep, from one position to another in the course of days, weeks, years of such arguments. On paper, you concentrate on those rare moments in political discussions when two people who know exactly what their own positions are present them in such a way that one, in response to a single, well-formed argument from an opponent, changes her or his mind.

I am not a libertarian. I'm quick to say that I'm a Marxist—or, at any rate, a Marxian. I remember how distressed I was, some years ago, when I found that some of my *Neverÿon* stories and novels, in which there were a couple of ironic arguments about economics, had been taken up—briefly—by the libertarians. Indeed, if I have a major criticism of libertarianism, as I understand it, it seems to be their belief in the fiction of precisely that sort of political argument (which leaves everybody in a general consensus at the end—*ha!*) that has only a literary existence. What's really wrong with the libertarians is how intellectually clean they want their politics to be.

I wouldn't be surprised if some of the "libertarianism" of cyberpunk is of that similar, by and large rhetorical, variety.

**MARK DERY:** As agreed, we've tried to devote this interview to issues of race. I'd like to end, however, with a few questions about gender and sexuality. To begin, why has there been so little overtly gay SF?

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** There is, of course, a whole bibliography full of gay science fiction—it's covered in Lyn Paleo's and Eric Garber's rather hefty book-length bibliography, *Uranian Worlds*. And there is a considerable gay fandom—far larger, in my rough estimate, than black fandom, by a factor of twenty or thirty. There is at least one annual gay science fiction convention, *Gaylaxicon*, which draws nearly a thousand attendees each year. And the gay programming that regularly, today, turns up in other science fiction conventions is almost always among the most crowded, standing-room-only events. In any randomly chosen group, the gay population will always already (as the poststructuralists were once so fond of saying) be between 10 and 20 percent. The question is whether, as in the current debate about the military, they have the freedom (read: power) to talk about it openly without reprisals. And, in fandom, at least since 1978 (a mere nine years after Stonewall), when the World SF Convention first instituted a track of gay programming, they have.

Having said that, there's a good deal of vague, unstated, publishing anxiety about gay SF, however, having to do with a fear that "it won't be commercial," which is code for a fear that, in the endless chain of middlemen who have to decide, before the fact (in our wonderful free-market economy), if something will sell or not in order to invest in it, each is haunted by the anticipated phantom of some

fourteen-year-old's disapproving parent in Whereversville, who will write a letter to the bookstore chains and sic the forces of Fundamentalist Christianity on them if they are caught letting some gay title get by.

One would think, since gay fans are so vocally and undeniably in evidence, some publisher, paying attention to the programming at an SF convention, would—from the most mercenary motives—simply decide to follow the commonsense free-economy laws and devote from 10 to 20 percent of his or her line to SF of interest to gay readers. It would take some time to catch on, of course—but whatever publisher finally decides to fight through the real and material pressures of that anxiety barrier will, let's face it, clean up! But until that happens, they will make endless excuses for why they don't.

**MARK DERY:** Do you have any sense of how you're received in the gay community?

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** As with the members of any community, when faced with the work of a producer, some people in it like me—and a lot of others ignore me. Wouldn't it be odd if it were anything else?

**MARK DERY:** What do you, as a gay SF author, make of K/S, or "slash," fanzines, in which female fans spin soft-core fantasies from the homoerotic subtext in *Star Trek* narratives?

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** I haven't looked at any "K/S" fanzines for seven or eight years, at this point. Pretty much like everyone else, what I was struck with at the time, however, was the extraordinarily high quality of the writing in all this amateur porn—and not *all* of it "soft-core" by a long shot! And the sheer amount of the stuff is impressive. (I confess, I've never heard it called "slash" before—but that may be a change from the last half-dozen years.) If the production level has kept up since the few hundred pages of it I saw some years ago, by this time, there must be more than enough to fill a good-sized barn with the stuff!

As a gay man, I confess: the several hundred pages that I went through, for me, hard-core or soft-, were without erotic interest—just as, I suspect, most straight men's lesbian fantasies are not the sort that excite practicing lesbians. In general, the stuff was just too antiseptic.

Still, the "K/S" material confirmed something that I already knew from my own life: that there are just as many heterosexual women who are turned on by the idea of men having sex with one another as there are heterosexual men who are turned on by the idea of women having sex with one another—that the engines of desire are far more complex than we usually give them credit for; and that if lesbians and gay men didn't exist, heterosexual men and women would have had to invent them—because they constantly do.

**MARK DERY:** Are you a fan of some of the noteworthy female SF authors: Octavia Butler, James Tiptree, Jr. (a.k.a. Alice Sheldon), or

**SAMUEL R. DELANY:** And Ursula Le Guin? Very much so. At one point or another in my SF classes at the University of Massachusetts, I've talked about them all. I think Russ, by the way, is simply one of the finest stylists in America, in or out of science fiction. She is a writer of such incredible sensitivity and, at the same time, such corrosive power, that I know at some point or another she will be discovered by the greater literary world. It's just a matter of when. (It would be very nice if it happened while she was still alive!) If you liked Molly Millions in *Neuromancer* and "Johnny Mnemonic," you should read the original: Russ's *Jael*, in *The Female Man*, which appeared nine years before, back in 1975.

Not that Gibson consciously took Molly from *Jael*. I asked him once, and though he too is a Russ admirer (who, with a grain of taste, could not be?), he told me that *Jael* was not in his mind as a conscious model at the time he wrote *Molly*. But the parallels are striking—indeed, so striking, what they suggest is the astonishing strength of those images Russ first poured out into the SF landscape—where they functioned like delicate templates twisted from magnesium wire and set suddenly alight by a prose cleaner than Carver's. Their afterimages are simply fixed to the sensitive retina, whether the eye is open or closed. Dozens of writers in the SF field—Gibson is only one—have been calling on them, constantly and unconsciously, ever since. They are that powerful and pervasive.

Again, to repeat my point from the piece on cyberpunk that you cited from the *Mississippi Review* cyberpunk issue: if their excitement

over cyberpunk sends various academics back to the range of science fiction and its extraordinary accomplishments and excellencies, if it makes them excavate some of SF's debates over cyberpunk, and learn and appreciate the SF history that informs those debates and gives the texts their richest meaning, then cyberpunk is a good thing indeed. If, however, it functions as an excuse for the same academics to dismiss science fiction because, since they've read Gibson, surely they've got the best there is and need not bother with the rest, that would be as tragic—and fundamentally as illiterate—a gesture as that of some wise fool, who, having read a handful of Milton's sonnets, decides to dispense with the rest of the canonical range of English-language poetry because certainly he has already encountered all that's meaningful.

**MARK DERY:** Why hasn't the African-American community made more use, either as writers or readers, of science fiction?

**GREG TATE:** I don't know that that's necessarily true; I've read SF since I was about twelve years old and I know a lot of black people who read it. Also, in comic-book fandom, which is certainly a related field, 25 percent of the readership is black, which is pretty high. Denys Cowan's New York-based Milestone Media, the first company formed by black comic book artists, writers, and editors, has just come out with four comic books featuring black superheroes. According to the people at Milestone, the industry also knows that 50 percent of the comic readership is nonwhite—black, Latino, and Asian American. So I would argue that the visionary vistas of SF contained in comics are definitely attracting black readers.

**MARK DERY:** Samuel Delany, who maintains that incursions have been made by people of color into the comic book genre (he calls it "paraliterature"), would agree with you. Even so, he asserts that the science fiction novel remains a white genre, for the most part.

**GREG TATE:** Well, if you look at the black writing that's been done in this century, from Richard Wright on, there's always been huge dollops of fantasy, horror, and science fiction in it. There are science fiction sequences in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for example.

**MARK DERY:** The horrific "battle royale" comes immediately to mind.

**GREG TATE:** Right, and the scene where the protagonist's identity is scraped away in the basement of the paint factory. The whole intellectual landscape of the novel, which deals with the condition of being alien and alienated, speaks, in a sense, to the way in which being black in America is a science fiction experience.

**MARK DERY:** Alien Nation.

**GREG TATE:** Certainly, and if you want to make a direct connection to the TV series *Alien Nation*, remember that the aliens in that show were former slaves who were brought to Earth on a ship and just dumped on these shores. But to return to your question, I would agree that writers like Delany and Octavia Butler are anomalies in African-American literature in the sense that they are clearly dealing with the kinds of things that African-American literature has traditionally dealt with—racism and alienation—but they've made a conscious decision to deal with those issues in the context of genre fiction.

On the other hand, there's probably a fairly sizable number of prominent black writers who read science fiction or who are at least conscious of its devices and have used them in their work. Clarence Major and Ishmael Reed are among the most prominent. All of Reed's novels collapse time: ancient time and things to come coexist, which is simultaneously a very African, mythic, cyclical way of looking at time and a kind of prehistoric postmodernism. In John A. Williams's *Captain Blackman*, which is about the historical experience of the black soldier, the author kills and revives the same soldier in war after war in a *Twilight Zone* way. And if you look at the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola, whose work uses Yoruban mythology in an SF rather than a folkloric manner, he essentially creates his own fantasies out of the general range of possibilities implied by that mythology.

One of the things that characterizes science fiction is the somewhat didactic way in which instruction is given about the potential for catastrophe in a society when its members don't pay attention to the paths that either a new technology or an aberrant life form may take. In that sense, SF parallels traditional mythology, which is full of cautionary tales. Delany once observed that the best science fiction novels had a mystical component to them; he was probably thinking

of *The Stars My Destination* by Alfred Bester, *More Than Human* by Theodore Sturgeon, or *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein, novels that acknowledge the existence of a greater power in the context of science fiction.

But to return to your initial question, I would have to say that most of the black novelists writing in this century have identified with the African-American literary tradition that includes Ellison, Wright, Baldwin, and Morrison rather than the tradition that includes Heinlein, Asimov, and even Butler and Delany.

**MARK DERY:** Delany suggested to me that blacks are fenced out of science fiction by semiotic concertina wire, that the blinking instrument panels and other technological paraphernalia that typify the genre function as "No Trespassing" signs for writers of color.

**GREG TATE:** I can't accept that, because you have such a whole-hearted embrace of that hardware by black and Latino youth when it appears in films, TV shows, video games. I mean, who would have predicted that young black and Latino males would spend enough time in Times Square video arcades during the late seventies to make those games the million-dollar industry that they are? There's definitely a fascination with sci-fi imagery in video games, and if you look at the graffiti art done in the New York subways throughout that same era by artists like Rammellzee, Phase 2, Kase, and Blade, there's an incredible interest in fantasy in the SF vein, especially in the apocalyptic sense, involving the insertion of black figures into post-atomic holocaust landscapes. A lot of Blade's work, for example, is set in a cyberspace-style environment; his imagery looks like computer graphics, with his name running through the landscape. Futura 2000's painting *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, which pays homage to the hip-hop group Cypress Hill, has three ghostly figures floating on what appears to be a TV screen hovering over a dark, ominous cityscape.

So if you look at the work of black visual artists, from graffiti artists to Jean-Michel Basquiat, there is always this insertion of black figures into a visionary landscape, if not a science fiction or fantasy landscape. The imaginative leap that we associate with science fiction, in terms of putting the human into an alien and alienating environment,

is a gesture that repeatedly appears in the work of black writers and visual artists.

**MARK DERY:** The positioning of oneself, literally, as a stranger in a strange land.

**GREG TATE:** Right, and there are certainly long-standing spiritual traditions that lend themselves to that impulse: santeria, voudon, and the hoodoo religion that Ishmael Reed talks about.

**MARK DERY:** It's worth pointing out, in the context of what I've chosen to call "Afrofuturism," that the mojos and goofer dust of Delta blues, together with the lucky charms, fetishes, effigies, and other devices employed in syncretic belief systems, such as voodoo, hoodoo, santeria, mambo, and macumba, function very much like the joysticks, Datagloves, Waldos, and Spaceballs used to control virtual realities. Jerome Rothenberg would call them technologies of the

**GREG TATE:** I agree, although I think you're putting the interstellar carriage before the Egyptian horse, in a way. I see science fiction as continuing a vein of philosophical inquiry and technological speculation that begins with the Egyptians and their incredibly detailed meditations on life after death. SF represents a kind of rationalist, positivist, scientific codification of that impulse, but it's still coming from a basic human desire to know the unknowable, and for a lot of black writers, that desire to know the unknowable directs itself toward self-knowledge. Knowing yourself as a black person—historically, spiritually, and culturally—is not something that's given to you, institutionally; it's an arduous journey that must be undertaken by the individual.

One of the questions we're moving toward in this conversation is: Where does science fiction end and black existence begin, in America? It may be that no one, in a literary sense, has tried to expound on that paradox. But hip-hop—where there's clearly an identification with the territory occupied by science fiction—seems to touch on this question. The cover of the first X Clan record, *To the East, Blackwards*, depicts a pink Cadillac heading into space, surrounded by stars and the faces of black martyrs, like some interstellar version of the Wall of Fame on the Apollo Theater. And then there's

Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet*—I don't know if it gets anymore sci-fi than that!

**MARK DERY:** In "Diary of a Bug," in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, you state, "Hip-hop is ancestor worship"; later in the same essay collection, you quote a lecture given by Delany at the Studio Museum of Harlem in which he says, "We need images of tomorrow, and our people need them more than most." I sometimes wonder if there isn't an inherent dichotomy in hip-hop between a displaced people's need to reaffirm a common history and the quintessentially American emphasis on forward motion, effected through technological progress. Don't these contradictory impulses threaten to tear hip-hop apart?

**GREG TATE:** No, because you can be backward-looking and forward-thinking at the same time. The approach to everything in hip-hop is always with a sense of play, so that even ancestor worship is subject to irreverence. Ironically, one of the things that's allowed black culture to survive is its ability to operate in an iconoclastic way in regard to the past; the trappings of tradition are never allowed to stand in the way of innovation and improvisation. You have to remember, too, that black reverence for the past is a reverence for a paradise lost. It's not a past that anyone knows from experience, but a past gleaned from discussions, from books by scholars like Dr. Ben Yochanan who have dedicated their lives to researching the scientific glories of black civilizations.

You know, SF, like hip-hop, is a very sociohistorical genre. It's a totalizing way of looking at America, as Delany has pointed out, that mundane literature could never begin to approach. Science fiction eschews the psychological dimension in terms of character portrayal for a more all-encompassing look at the impact of the various institutions that govern behavior and the transmission of knowledge. And in the same way that SF focuses on the impact of information technologies on the psychology of a society, black literature moves the silence and intellectual marginalization of blacks to the foreground. Both represent an attempt to view everything through a single lens, so that we can see the specter haunting society that society doesn't want to acknowledge.

One of the things I've been trying to say all along is that the condi-

tion of alienation that comes from being a black subject in American society parallels the kind of alienation that science fiction writers try to explore through various genre devices—transporting someone from the past into the future, thrusting someone into an alien culture, on another planet, where he has to confront alien ways of being. All of these devices reiterate the condition of being black in American culture. Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine.

At the same time, I'm a little uncomfortable with creating a pyramid of explication in which the black experience is on the bottom and science fiction becomes the way in which one "logically" discusses it. I think that there is an incredible amount of insight to be gained from reading African-American literature with the perspective of SF criticism in mind, and vice versa. As I've said, there is a redemptive quality to both literatures in terms of the way that they deal with the plight of the outsider, not to mention the simple acknowledgment that there are outsiders in society, that many of us are living a Kafkaesque existence here in what is supposed to be the best of all possible worlds: America.

**MARK DERY:** What accounts for the profound influence on black dance culture of Kraftwerk, a calculatedly funkless electro-pop band? Does their impact, traces of which are clearly discernible in techno, suggest that the very notion of funk has been cyborged?

**TRICIA ROSE:** I believe that what made Kraftwerk so interesting to Afrika Bambaataa and Arthur Baker [who used Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express" as the schematic for their electro-boogie classic "Planet Rock"] is the way it demonstrated a mastery over technology, and mastery over technology engenders a degree of awe, particularly in black folks whose access to technology is limited. So some of it is sheer awe, but it's also about having an open, creative mind toward different ways of producing sound.

Digital music technology—samplers, sequencers, drum machines are themselves cultural objects, and as such they carry cultural ideas. These machines force black musicians into certain ways of producing sound inside certain parameters, in this case nineteenth-

century European musical constructions. Having said that, I resist the reading that by definition suggests that being black and funky means that one can't occupy certain spaces.

**MARK DERY:** Can one be situated in the African-American musical tradition and still speak the aesthetic language of the technetronic society? In other words, can one be funky and mechanical?

**TRICIA ROSE:** No question; that's what hip-hop is! The real question is: How do we define what being "mechanical" means? If we take a kind of Frankfurt School/fascist/industrial regimentation/lack of creativity as our model for the machine, then of course funky cyborgs would seem like an utter contradiction; but if we understand the machine as a product of human creativity whose parameters are always suggesting what's beyond them, then we can read hip-hop as the response of urban people of color to the postindustrial landscape. Although most people do not have the power to structurally transform the worlds they live in, many attempt microscopic responses to things that appear in their landscapes.

Electro-boogie took place in a historical moment—"Planet Rock" was released in 1982—when factory production and solid blue-collar work were coming to a screeching halt in urban America. Urban blacks were increasingly unemployed, and their best options were to become hidden workers for service industries or computer repair people. People said, "Look, technology is here; we can choose to be left behind or we can try to take control of the beast."

This bears a resemblance to what the black cultural and literary theorist James A. Snead refers to as "the management of ruptures."<sup>17</sup> How do cultures respond to social ruptures? Do we incorporate them or reject them, refusing transformation? This is the larger question we should ask when we talk about black cultural transformation because for every point of continuity, there are fascinating points of discontinuity. This is our problem: we have to be able to say, yes, industrial logic dominates a number of cultural products and ways of thinking in the world, while at the same time acknowledging that not everything is a subset of that framework.

What Afrika Bambaataa and hip-hoppers like him saw in Kraftwerk's use of the robot was an understanding of themselves as already

*having been robots.* Adopting "the robot" reflected a response to an existing condition: namely, that they were labor for capitalism, that they had very little value as people in this society. By taking on the robotic stance, one is "playing with the robot." It's like wearing body armor that identifies you as an alien: if it's always on anyway, in some symbolic sense, perhaps you could master the wearing of this guise in order to use it *against* your interpolation.

The question is: How are signs and images used? Kraftwerk, of course, can have more than one meaning. Let's say, for example, that Kraftwerk did not understand itself as some prole club-music phenomenon that mocked factory capitalism and the logic of industrial life. Let's say, instead, that they were totally into industrial regimentation, that they were twenty-first-century-style Carnegie capitalists in the making. It wouldn't change my argument, because my argument isn't "Do they feel a kinship with Kraftwerk as Kraftwerk sees itself?" but rather, "What can this symbol of regimentation mean for them?"

By contrast, there are a number of hip-hop scenes around the world in which you find racially conservative kids wearing Malcolm X gear. The new right in Germany has taken up all kinds of black cultural symbols, and some nonblack American hip-hop kids feel a kinship with black culture but clearly have very racist ideas about what being black means and how it fits into the world schema.

These realities argue in favor of multiple meanings for objects, meanings which can't be fixed and floated across time and space. Kraftwerk gets taken up in a way that may or may not be understood as resistive; in addition, Kraftwerk's own position may or may not be understood as resistive. I'm interested in reading effects in context, which is why technology can be emancipatory for hip-hop—because of its effects, not because it is "naturally" emancipatory.

**MARK DERY:** What does the hip-hop catchphrase "droppin' science" mean?

**TRICIA ROSE:** It means sharing knowledge, knowledge that is generally inaccessible to people, together with a fearlessness about stating what you believe to be the truth. There's also the implication that the information you're imparting is going to revolutionize things be-

cause this is the truth that has been deliberately and systematically denied. Science, here, stands in for incontrovertible evidence. Science is understood as that space where the future takes place.

**MARK DERY:** Sun Ra, who claims to be from Saturn, is known for songs like "Rocket No. 9 Take Off for the Planet Venus"; his concerts have incorporated movies of his orchestra parading around the Sphinx. What meanings can be squeezed out of Ra's conflation of ancient Egyptian imagery and alien saviors?

**TRICIA ROSE:** Sun Ra's flying saucer imagery is about accepting the mystical powers that one knows, culturally, and seeing science as a mystical process as well—a process that has to do not only with deductive reasoning, but with creating power and positing new social myths. It's about reconciling those two histories. If you're going to imagine yourself in the future, you have to imagine where you've come from; ancestor worship in black culture is a way of countering a historical erasure.

At the same time, romantic visions of an agrarian memory of black creativity are seriously problematic; certainly, we need to investigate those periods, but to position them as the pinnacle of black creativity and the rest of history as a decline that works in a one-to-one ratio with technological influences completely misunderstands both the technological creativity of, say, blues artists, working with the most sophisticated technologies available to them, and the fact that even those so-called unadulterated periods constituted a break from former environments. I refuse the Frankfurt model of authenticity, which distinguishes between what is "really creative" and some sort of technological simulation of creativity.

These notions of creative authenticity often contribute to a construction of black culture in such a way that blacks are romanticized. These romantic visions take place long after hip-hop's initial interventions and in so doing make it impossible to see the way in which black folks are on the cutting edge of transforming technology and their relationship to it. These visions constitute an extraordinarily contradictory reading of black creativity that positions the reader as a postcolonial observer of a black culture that is miraculously untainted by "our" violence and loss of spirituality. The white

romance with the blues, exemplified by the movie *Crossroads*, is a clear example of this phenomenon. Of course, blacks are docile and compliant in this vision even as they "refuse" to partake of the creative tools made available by postindustrial commodification. Among other things, this bespeaks a profound misunderstanding of the transformative energy of black creativity in general and of contemporary young, black cultural workers in particular.

There's no question that there's a tendency among people who live under extraordinarily oppressive conditions to long for a time when they had more control over a smaller space. But the dream of a place where one is linked to the universe in a more spiritual and philosophical way is too often part of a postcolonial white fantasy which by definition depends on the domination of another group of people for its reconstruction of that arcadian time.

**MARK DERY:** The problem with those sorts of narratives, it seems, is that they're assembly lines for the production of binary oppositions. For example, the eco-feminist utopias of seventies sci-fi, even as they imagined gardens of earthly delight, vilified technology as inherently masculinist. In light of this, Donna Haraway theorizes the cyborg as "an ironic political myth" that offers an escape route from "the maze of dualisms." I wonder how useful such a myth is for you as a black woman, given our earlier discussion of the multivalent nature of the image of the robot in hip-hop culture.

**TRICIA ROSE:** Well, I'm a strange case in that my fantasies of control involve a lot of physical power; I don't have a hold-hands, hippie notion of how I want my space to be, and people often perceive that kind of aggressiveness as masculine. Although I don't see myself as particularly masculine, I'm often accused of thinking like a male, which suggests that people are operating inside of a very troubled notion of what femininity is.

I'm not troubled by the cyborg as an imaginary, but by the fact that it's almost impossible for the average young woman to see herself as a person who could take up that much social space. It suggests a social and psychological containment that makes it impossible for women to see themselves as major actors in a technological world.

**MARK DERY:** One thing that bothers me about the notion of the cyborg

as a useful myth is the fact that the flesh cedes territory to invasive technologies—myoelectric armatures, cyberoptic implants, brain sockets. If machines continue to signify an impregnable masculinity, and if the flesh continues to be coded as feminine—as is so often the case in Hollywood SF—then the myth of the cyborg is one more story told about the feminine subjugated.

**TRICIA ROSE:** Absolutely. The cyborg is a masculine construct in which the technology houses all of the hard, strong, *Terminator* capacity, and the softer stuff is understood as the weak portion, the part that bleeds, menstruates. The question is not cyborg possibilities in and of themselves, but how the cyborg has been constructed by patriarchal discourse and how it might be reinvented.

If we had hordes and hordes of women who were paid to sit around and reimagine the science fiction genre, they might treat technology differently, placing it in a different relationship to the organism, and then what would cyborgs look like? What relationship would the technology have to the body if cyborgs were imagined with different stress points, different identity problems, different responses to incorporation? Again, I refuse to blame the technology; it's about how we imagine its usefulness, and what we value. If we don't value the ways in which women create, it doesn't really matter what we do or do not invent; we could stay on the farm and women would be just as oppressed. For that reason, I don't really see science fiction models of the future as a necessarily more oppressive space for women than I do current fictions of an idealized past.

**MARK DERY:** Haraway argues, in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," for what I would call a technofeminist ideology that refuses "an anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology." Which leads me to wonder: Would the female shootist in Patrick Carr's book, *Gun People*, who says, "With a gun I have more . . . control over potential events around me, and more personal power," fit Haraway's definition of an oppositional monster? Furthermore, what do you make of the linkage between handgun fetishism and an abhorrence for childbirth evinced by postfeminists like the avant-garde diva Diamanda Galás, who believes that "all women . . . have to get guns" (her celebrity endorsement goes to the .38 Special),<sup>18</sup> and who once told me,

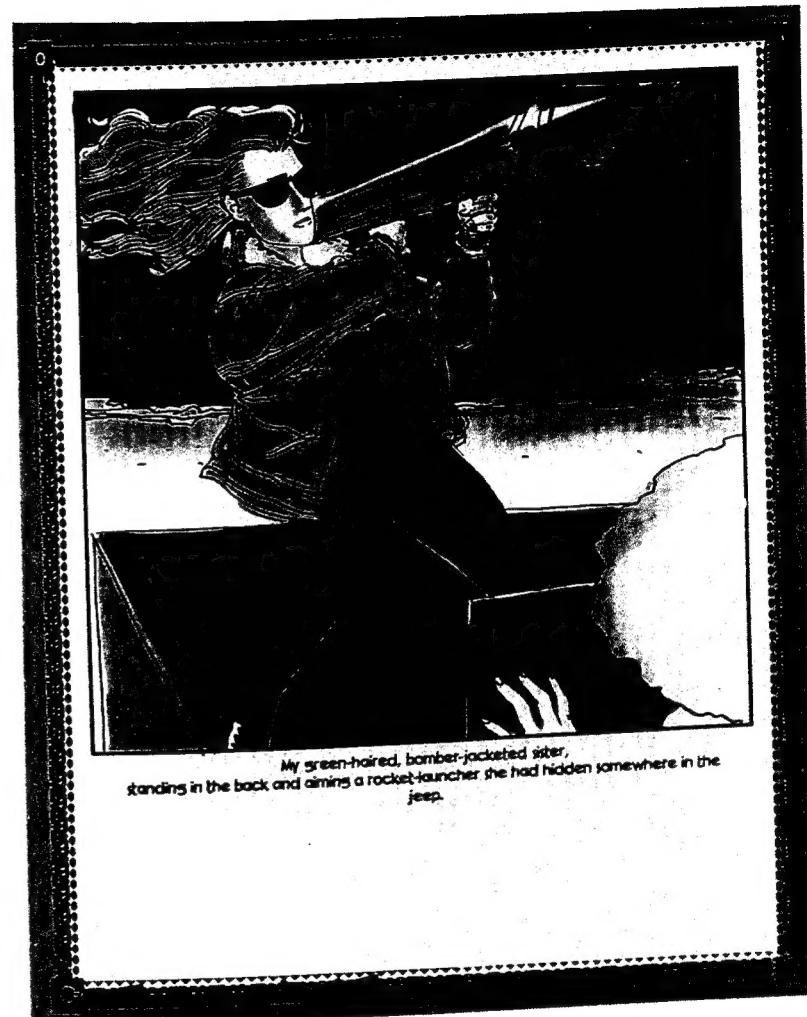
I'm hostile to the act of childbirth. I consider it fundamentally demeaning to women to be walking around with this deformed, aberrant body, bearing children for men. Although mainstream society says that breeding is natural for heterosexuals, I find it repellent and very unnatural.

**TRICIA ROSE:** That's an incredible question; I really would like to explore this because I, too, have had a total phobia about childbearing, associating it with containment, confinement, and giving in to male desire—all of which, I think, is a product of understanding that you will be structured this way whether you experience pregnancy this way or not. Courtney Love [Hole guitarist and wife of Nirvana singer-guitarist Kurt Cobain] said, in a recent *Rolling Stone* cover story, that she experienced the worst sexism of her whole life while she was pregnant. Pregnant women feel physically vulnerable and feel that they signify some sort of male access to them; it's a profoundly problematic position.

The relationship between gun lust and a loathing for childbirth is a binary opposition based on a Protestant definition of sexuality. The gun is about control, and the idea that you need to be in control all the time means that you don't feel like you are in control. If women have to hold on to guns to reclaim some sense of power that they have lost structurally, it indicates that we, as a society, are horribly out of balance. It isn't just about women taking up arms or about men being wimpy yogurt-eaters, as in Robert Bly's imagination, it's about saying that all of us have a wide range of emotional, sexual, physical, psychological reactions, and that both sexes are incredibly constrained by societal structures.

I would call for an investigation of maternal, matriarchal African narratives about the power of reproduction. A feminist friend once said to me, "You know, I think men try to control women's sexuality because they're terrified of the incredible creative energy involved in reproducing life forms." If women could harness that power and not be afraid of it, it would be the equivalent of owning all the guns you'd ever want to own. But many of us are afraid of trying to spiritually transcend the social construction of pregnancy.

We need radical feminist models of pregnancy and motherhood.



*My green-haired, bomber-jacketed sister, standing in the back and aiming a rocket-launcher she had hidden somewhere in the jeep.*

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I think feminist mothers are the most dangerous muthafuckahs out there; if I were to be really hard-core, I could say that feminists who refuse to have children ain't threatenin' shit after a certain point! I think the key is for feminist women to have as much power and as many babies as they want to, creating universes of feminist children.

I watched *Aliens* again last night and what I loved about Sigourney Weaver is the way in which she manages both directed aggressiveness and sensuality. You watch her pet that cat near the beginning of the film, in the hospital, and it's very sensual at the same time that you know she's all about trying to take somebody out. Similarly, what was so brilliant about *The Terminator* was the way in which Linda Hamilton's character, Sarah Connor, became a warrior of reproduction.

The question is: Who is doing the constructing? The problem with the *Terminator* series and the *Alien* trilogy is that male imagination is driving the narrative, which is what makes a pistol-packin' mama like Sarah Connor so problematic. But the larger question is, once again, not "How was Sarah Connor constructed by the filmmaker?" but "How do the feminist graduate students I know (many of whom idolize these characters) use these women in ways that rewrite the narrative and maybe rewrite their life roles?" Furthermore, how might their readings allow another generation of feminist independent filmmakers to reimagine Sarah Connor? These are small, potential building blocks toward something larger; they're not an end but a means to a larger end.

These images are opening up possibilities, revising what men and women think women ought to be, even if they wind up endorsing patriarchal norms in other ways. Hollywood has to reaffirm the status quo, of course, but trust me when I tell you that just by opening those gates, they're creating a rupture they may not be able to suture.

#### Notes

- 1 William Gibson, interviewed in the video documentary, *Cyberpunk* (1990).
- 2 Norman Spinrad, *Science Fiction in the Real World* (Carbondale, IL, 1990), 9.
- 3 William Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," in *Mirrorshades*, ed. Bruce Sterling (New York, 1986), 7.

- 4 All Milestone-related quotes are from the two-page press release, "Milestone Media Fact Sheet," and "Starting off with a Bang," a one-page summary of *Icon's* plot.
- 5 *Benét's Reader's Encyclopedia*, ed. Katherine Baker Siepmann (New York, 1987), 62.
- 6 Greg Tate, "Yo! Hermeneutics! Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, David Toop," in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York, 1992), 154.
- 7 Rammellzee, "The Movement of the Letter: The Polishing of the Equation Rammellzee," in *New Observations #93: Exact Fantasies*, ed. Tracy A. Smith (New York, 1993), 20.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 20-21.
- 9 Quoted in Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, 147.
- 10 David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip-Hop* (Boston, 1984), 146-48.
- 11 This text, which began as a telephone interview, was extensively reworked by Mr. Delany during the months of January through April, 1993, in Amherst, Ann Arbor, and New York.
- 12 Greg Tate, "Ghetto in the Sky: Samuel Delany's Black Whole," in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York, 1992), 165-66.
- 13 Samuel R. Delany, "Is Cyberpunk a Good Thing or a Bad Thing?" *Mississippi Review* 16 (1988): 28-35.
- 14 Andrew Ross, "Cyberpunk in Boystown," in *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (New York, 1991), 146.
- 15 Mikal Gilmore, "The Rise of Cyberpunk," *Rolling Stone*, 4 December 1986.
- 16 Jeanne Gomoll, "An Open Letter to Joanna Russ," *Aurora* 25 (1986): 7-10; and Bruce Sterling, Letter to the Editor, *Aurora* 26 (1990): 7.
- 17 James A. Snead, "On Repetition in Black Culture," *Black American Literature Forum* 15 (1981): 146-54. Tricia Rose would like to thank Arthur Jafa for bringing this work and this formulation to her attention.
- 18 Interview with Diamanda Galás, in *Re/Search #13: Angry Women*, ed. Andrea Juno and V. Vale (San Francisco, 1991), 22.

GARETH BRANWYN

## COMPU-SEX: EROTICA FOR CYBERNAUTS

Cyberspace is more than a breakthrough in electronic media or in computer interface design. With its virtual environments and simulated worlds, cyberspace is a . . . tool for examining our very sense of reality.

—Michael Heim

In an enduring ritual of nightly "cruising," a crowd of people has gathered in a lonely-hearts club. A man musters up the courage to approach a woman and fires off a few of his best one-liners. She takes the bait and tugs the line with some sexy retorts of her own. The chemistry is right; things heat up. They are soon jarred back to reality by the teasing of those around them who've caught on to their little game. Embarrassed, they quickly pass notes and plan a late-night rendezvous. Both show up punctually at the private place they have chosen. An awkward silence is broken by more provocative flirting, and then, finally, what they've both come for: sex. They quickly undress one another and begin making frantic love. The exchange is short

